BACK TO REALITY
I Kings 19:1-19
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The Second Lesson this morning is from the Old Testament - the First Book of Kings, 19th Chapter. I will read a fresh translation by American Old Testament Scholar Davie Napier...This is not the authorized version. Napier calls it an historical, critical translation which intends to recreate what the scholars believe may have been the original Elijah story in the 9th century B C...

Elijah is the prophet -
Jahweh is God's name in Hebrew -
Ahab is the King -
Jezebel is Ahab's wife, a foreign born Queen.

Elijah has just embarassed the Queen publicly, and the 19th Chapter begins. Listen for the Word of God...

On the Way to the Cave: I Kings 19:2-ba, 8

Now Jezebel sent this word to Elijah: "If you are Elijah, I am Jezebel!" Frightened for his life, he ran away;and when he got to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there and went on himself for a day into the wilderness; until at last he sat down under a broom tree and prayed that he might die. "I've had it, Yahweh," he said. "Take my life: I'm no better than those who've gone before me." He lay down there and went to sleep; until suddenly someone touched him and said, "Wake up and eat." He looked about - and there at his head was a stone-baked biscuit and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and then, on the strength of that nourishment, he went on to Horeb.

The Stay at the Cave: I Kings 19:9a, 11b, 12-15, 18

Coming there to a cave, he spent the night.
And there was a mighty wind
Not in the wind was Yahweh.
And after the wind, earthquake
Not in the earthquake was Yahweh.
And after the earthquake, fire
Not in the fire was Yahweh.
And after the fire -
A sound of gentle silence.

Upon hearing this, Elijah covered his face with his robe and went out to take his position at the mouth of the cave. It was only now that the Word of Yahweh was: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Elijah replied: "I have been passionately devoted to Yahweh, God of hosts, even while the people of Israel have abandoned you. Your altars they have destroyed, your prophets they have put to death with the sword. I am left now, myself, alone; and they are after me to take my life!" But Yahweh answered him, "Go back the way you have come; because there are still seven thousand left in Israel whose knees have never bent to Baal, nor whose lips have kissed him!" (Word of God...Word of Earth, David Napier, p.56-57).

That is a very old and precious remnant of tradition. It is also, in a remarkably accurate way, our story. People are still afraid, looking for an escape from the dangers, frustrations, and disappointments of life. People are still jumping into the nearest cave, sometimes claiming that they are seeking the God who eludes them in life - sometimes trying to hide from Him. And, I would submit, the Living Word of the eternal God, continues to call people back to life, back to the world, back to reality.

It is also the best of all texts for this particular Sunday in the church year. Most of us have been in one kind of cave or another this summer; vacation, travel, an intentiona and unapologetic escape from busyness and frantic schedules and every night of the week meetings. This week the period of the cave ended and we were called back. Some of us come gladly; some of us very reluctantly; some of us are going to try not to come back at all...

The original story takes place sometime around 850 BC. Ahab was King of Israel. His wife, Jezebel, was the daughter of a Phoenician priest and a devout adherent of Phoenician religion known as Baalism. When Ahab brought her to Israel as Queen her royal entourage included an eyebrow-raising 450 Baal priests and 400 prophets of the Mother-Goddess Asherah for good measure.

There were some very appealing aspects of Baalism in addition to the fact that the Queen was a "Born Again Baalist". The religion emphasized the life force in nature, human fertility and sexuality as the primary focus of the divine - and that is always intriguing and appealing. When Israelite prophets stood up in the land and spoke against Baalism or its leading adherent in the royal palace they were promptly executed for trouble making and treason against the state...

Elijah enters the tale at this point. A prophet in Gilead, he traveled to the palace, made an appointment with Ahab and announced bluntly that because of the King's religious infidelity there would be a drought. For two years the drought continued; Ahab summoned Elijah to the palace; Elijah repeated his prophetic word and challenged the Baal priests and prophets to a test of strength on Mt.Carmel. The people came to watch. Two bulls were to be slaughtered. The priests were to call on Baal to send down fire. Elijah would call on Yahweh, God of Israel. The test was held. The Baal priests tried but nothing happened. In a remarkable sequence when you consider that it's 2800 years old, Elijah poked a little fun: "Perhaps your God is taking a nap...Maybe he's out to lunch." Ultimately, Elijah prevailed. The people shouted "Yahweh is God"and put to death the priests and prophets of Baal. And Ahab gratefully drove his chariot home through a rainstorm with Elijah ecstaticall running before him - one of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible, I think...

Jezebel, however, took a very dim view of what had transpired and vowed to have revenge. Our text this morning began at this point. Elijah fled - for good reason, and just as he had been vindicated so gloriously on Mt. Carmel, ends up now on another mountain, Mt.Horeb - in a cave, breathless, but momentarily safe.

We dare not criticize the flight in fear. The danger was real, the threat immediate. Elijah was nothing if not a realist. I love Napier's translation..."Jezebel sent word to Elijah...'If you are Elijah, I am Jezebel!' Frightened for his life he ran away." He knew what she meant. I climbed out a window and jumped off a porch roof from disciplinary confinement in order to play a basketball game one time and my mother stopped me half a block away on a dead run simply by walking out on the porch and calling my name. I knew what she meant. I returned. Elijah fled.

It is not an unfamiliar dynamic. We're afraid that we're going to blow ourselves up if we don't stop producing nuclear weapons, and afraid of what the Russians will do if we do stop. We're afraid that we're running out of oil, and afraid that we'll choke the next generation with our coal dust or create a generation of mutants from our reactor spills, melt-downs and accidental ventilations. We're afraid that we're losing ground financially. We're working harder, making more money and we have less - and that dynamic, extended over a decade or so seriously frightens all but the few. And if our fears are real so is our disillusionment. The pollsters keep telling us that the majority finally believes that the past was better than the future, and that syndrome breeds cynicism and contempt. We're not sure the system works anymore. We're not sure that how we vote will make any difference. We're afraid and disillusioned and cynical and most of all exhausted. We're tired of trying to cope with what appears to be uncopeable.

Those burdens are external, common to all of us, a product of our time. They rest on top of othere layers of burdens, personal, private; burdens that weigh heavily on mind and spirit, too intimate to share with anyone. They may have to do with our children,our

relationships with them, our inability to be everything we want to be for them, their behavior and values: or our burden may be our marriages, our sexuality, our aging, our desperate sense that life is slipping between our fingers; our frustration and anger and disappointment.

We dare not criticize Elijah for that cave. We all go there sometimes - for good reason. Dr. Napier identifies the current hiding places for us in a cheerfully critical paragraph:

> "...the range of caves runs from the old standards of sex and alcohol and other drugs to TA (Transactional Analysis), TM (Transcendental Meditation), TV (before whom, on an average we stand, sit, lie, eat and drink an unconscionable and unbelievable amount of adult hours per week), TF (touchy-feely in dual or group encounter), TZ (Try Zen), TS (Take Sominex) or even, in some circles, TJ (Take Jesus) - in this sense an icon distantly derived from Jesus Christ, and literally scores of others...and one more cave in the "T" series, TB, turn back, turn back to the past." (Ibid, p.65).

Sometimes the cave is religion. All of us, some of the time, and some of us all the time, are looking for a cave on Sunday morning. It is a very precise fleeing - away from everything that has transpired from Monday through Saturday, away from the pain of ambiguity, or the sense of responsibility for the wretched condition of our world.We come to church to get away from ambiguity and moral relationship and from the harshness of life. It is a very precise pilgrimage sometimes and those of us who are in the church business know it and if we can arrange it so that the cave takes on reality here and worshippers can be transported into the simple past, or into a simple-minded world of piety, and if it is done in good taste with thick carpets and music by J.S.Bach, we will be immediately and profoundly successful.

A good friend of mine in Elkhart, Indiana, Bill Vamos, has written a new book in which he observes..."Our reaction has been to scurry to a place of personal safety and to stay there. The religions that are flourishing today are those that promise to deal with your inner construction, by providing you with sacred insulation...But that is not where we meet God. Nowhere in the Bible do we find God leading people to a permanent escape... Instead, what we find is a God who shows people how to move forward." (The Life that Listens, p.18).

There is, of course, a legitimate and healthy function for the cave. In fact, Elijah was renewed and refreshed after his experience. And in fact I'm so ready to go to work near the end of vacation my family can sense it. And I'm convinced that a good proportion of the marital stress which too often becomes malignant and destructive, would be remedied by a romantic weekend, alone, without children, and schedules, and car pools, about once a quarter, even if only at a local motel. Parents and children might get along much better if they got away together on occasion. There is a healthy function for the cave - a therapeutic, brief and always temporary function.

Some strange things happened outside Elijah's cave at Mt. Horeb...wind, earthquake, fire - none of which contained much of God for the firghtened prophet. Strange - because you and I - and Elijah's contemporaries are inclined to look for God's reality, his self-disclosure, in those very natural phenomena. You have known Him in the sunset and so have I, but theology that locates God in nature solely, and wants to worship, not in church, but on the lake, or golf course, ultimately is silly. Napier comments, "One suspects that the narrative stands as a splendid rebuke to all of us nature worshippers who are episodically disposed to make a theophany out of natural phenomena from sex to sunset, mountain to sea, rose to artichoke."(Ibid., p.63).

Strangest of all was what happened after the wind and earthquake and fire. "The still, small voice of calm" our Bible read - but it's a poor translation at best. The scholars agree - it wasn't a voice at all. The Hebrew reads..."The sound of a gentle silence". And I think the intent is to show us mystery and majesty and to warn us against trying to pin God down and force Him, by way of our own expectations, to sound like, and act like - what we think He should sound and act like, and most of all to say what we want to hear.

God will not be summoned by anybody's magic, nor jump through anybody's hoop. We have become adept at manipulating feelings and emotions to prove God's existence and our salvation, and for those of us who try to think objectively it's a little like whistling in the dark when you walk by a cemetery. God is God. He was not in the cave. He wasn't in the wind, earthquake and fire. His reality began to emerge in a silence, pregnant with meaning and content...

And when He spoke, finally, it wasn't to stroke Elijah for his courage, and it wasn't to hand out that blessed assurance we lust after, assurance that God exists and that He knows our name, that Jesus is mine and that we're safe. When God finally speaks, it's a question. "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And as soon as he becomes defensive - as we do too in those circumstances - the saving word is spoken..."Go - return - back to reality." That's the point...the saving word is not "Come to me: come rest a while," it's "Go - back to reality."

The gospel of Jesus Christ points us toward the world. That is its fundamental direction. The Kingdom it proclaims is not of the world, but it most certainly is in the world. Eternal life is part of the faith, the promise, but life now is the priority for Elijah's God, for Jesus, for Christian people.

You don't need your minister to tell you that the needs of our community and nation and earth are urgent. I was privileged to attend the First Global Conference on the Future this summer, a remarkable gathering of 4500 economists, scientists, philosophers and some theologians and there was a sense of urgency about the future. The futurists agree on very little, but they believe unanimously that we live in very dangerous and important times. Alvin Toffler wrote for the Conference - "Humanity faces the deepest social upheaval of all time. We are engaged in building a remarkable new civilization from the ground up." (Through the 80's, p.9). There are problems which simply must be resolved. There will be no more chances. Futurists differ radically as to the political situation, but unanimously they agree that we have no more than a generation to deal with economic disparity, population, hunger, natural resources (energy), environmental pollution. And while the temptation simply to remain aloof and hide is tremendous, it cannot, and must not, be done. Archibald MacLeish said somewhere that there are just two kinds of people - "the Pure and the Responsible", which is to way - responsible people may get their hands dirty in the future.

What you may need your minister, and the Bible, and Elijah for is to help you remember the promise that you'll find God in life. He wasn't in the cave. He isn't in the cave. He is not in crashing demonstrations of power. He is not contained in monuments nor cathedrals. He is not bracketed by nature nor by private emotional upheavals. Where you and I are likely to find Him is right in the middle of the ambiguity of life.

"Go - return, Elijah...get back into the business of life." The promise is that God is there. That is to say you may look for Him in the love you experience with your family. We celebrate His presence at a communion table here because we know He will be at your lunch table today - right in the middle of the argument about who clears the dishes. You may look for Him in your pain, and your frustration, your joy and even your boredom. As we discuss and argue about nuclear weapons and abortions and taxes and food stamps you can count on Him to be in the middle of it all, pushing, prodding, leading, judging.

That's the promise..."Back to God" doesn't mean to a religious retreat center, but an invitation to plunge into human life.

850 or so years after Elijah the promise was sealed: ancient word became flesh: a life began in a cow stall, was lived in small towns and dusty roads and teaming cities; and ended after a civil trial on a hill outside a capitol city; and was given again, resurrected, in someone's garden.

The Good News of Jesus Christ is that God will love you in those places-where you are in your life. He summons us to live life fully, not to escape from it, not to hide from it, but to live it. The promise is that He will love us, redeem us, save us, empower us, not in sacred isolation, but in life. So, expect Him today. Address Him, listen to Him, thank Him, love Him, serve Him.

Amen.

Our Father, give us the experiences of renewal which we need. But more, O God, give us courage to live our lives fully, to follow where You lead. Give us faith to know You and love You and serve You. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.